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Legislative Testimony

**House Bill 7069 An Act Concerning Access to Oral Health Care
Public Health Committee
March 5, 2007**

**Adele Gordon
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Senator Handley, Representative Sayers and members of the Public Health Committee Committee, good afternoon. My name is Adele Gordon, Director of the The Dental Center of Stamford and the Norwalk Smiles Dental Center. Thank you for the opportunity to communicate to your Committee today. I wish to indicate my support for HB 7069, An Act Concerning Access to Oral Health Care.

There is a real crisis that children and others participating in the state's HUSKY program face every day in trying to access dental care. We believe that extremely low reimbursement rates for dentists who see these patients are one of the major drivers of this crisis. Because of low rates, more than two-thirds of HUSKY children did not get basic oral health care in 2005. The State currently pays \$22 per month to provide dental insurance to its employees and their children, but only \$8 for HUSKY children. In a 2006 Department of Social Services study, only 27% of persistent 'mystery shoppers' were able to get a preventive dental appointment for a HUSKY child.

We strongly support legislation that would raise dental reimbursement rates to at least the 70th percentile of dentists' fees or about \$14.50 per child per month. The cost of this increase would prevent significant pain and suffering as well as the medical and other costs incurred across the health system now due to lack of preventive dental care to HUSKY children. And, the benefits would be huge.

The Dental Center and Smiles have many programs directed at young children. Often the children need to see a pediatric dentist but parents cannot afford the fees. We are then faced with no care for the child. We see 4 year old children with oral infections, food being cut up to swallowing size so they can eat. All in lower Fairfield County.

According to a 2001 report of the U.S. Surgeon General, oral health problems are responsible for more missed school days than any other type of health problem. Three out of 100 children miss school because of dental pain. You may be surprised to learn that tooth decay is five times more common than asthma and is the single most common chronic disease among children. When oral health problems are not addressed, the pain and suffering among these children often becomes so severe that they end up making costly visits to hospital emergency rooms that are already overburdened. In fact, 'dental problems' are one of the top two reasons that children visit emergency rooms during the day. Usually, there are no dentists available and treatment is for

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symptoms only. Patients sometimes must be hospitalized for acute infections, and are at increased risk of disease in permanent teeth, extensive pain and poor nutrition. They may even require oral surgery due to lack of early and regular dental care.

This week in Maryland, an 11 year old boy died from a tooth infection that went to his brain because of inadequate oral health care due his mother's lack of finances. While a rare occurrence, it could happen and it did!

In 2000, former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett "Chick" Koop, coined the phrase "You're not healthy without good oral health." This is something that most of us who have adequate dental insurance coverage and get regular oral health care don't have to think about. You may have noticed the growing number of news articles in the mainstream media about the proven links between oral health and a growing number of serious and systemic health problems. These include diabetes, heart disease, stroke, pancreatic cancer and preterm births. Research increasingly supports what professionals have long contended: we cannot separate oral health from overall health. Your mouth is a window into what's going on in the rest of the body.

More than six years ago, legal aid attorneys filed a lawsuit against the state for not providing dental care to children on HUSKY as provided by federal Medicaid law and regulation. With no settlement in sight, legislation is necessary to make sure that these kids do not suffer for another year. I had hoped that Governor Rell's proposed budget would support raising these rates that have languished at the same level since 1993 and make it unaffordable for most dentists to see children on the state's Medicaid plan. We believe that the Governor's omission of this important upgrade in the proposed biennial budget is short-sighted and perpetuates a serious and growing health problem among Connecticut children on the state's Medicaid Plan.

Responding to a recent survey by the Connecticut State Dental Association and the Connecticut Society of Pediatric Dentists, over 380 dentists across the state pledged that they will serve more HUSKY children if rates are raised. Currently, about 300 of them would be new HUSKY providers. Only about 100 Connecticut dentists provide significant levels of care to these kids now. Nine states have raised their Medicaid children's dental rates to similar levels and all have seen significant increases in provider participation.

We cannot stress how important it is for Connecticut's elected officials to increase reimbursement rates for dentists providing services to children in the state's HUSKY Plan during this legislative session. Passage of House Bill 7069, 'An Act Concerning Access to Oral Health Care' would get the job done. A similar bill succeeded in getting to final negotiations with the Governor last year.

We ask that you respond to the clear data that shows the importance of early and regular dental care, the lack of access among HUSKY children and that rate increases will go a long way in fixing this problem. We hope that you will pay serious attention to the growing body of research that shows how vital oral health is to general health, its extremely high incidence among poor children, and the high cost/benefit ratio of providing early, regular dental care to prevent more extreme problems that cause pain, suffering and missed school days.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to communicate with you today.